

TESTIMONY OF THE  
CONNECTICUT COALITION  
FOR **JUSTICE**  
IN EDUCATION FUNDING  
TO THE  
APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

March 1, 2011

The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding appreciates this opportunity to submit comments on the Department of Education portion of **HB 6380 — An Act Concerning the Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2013.**

CCJEF wishes to formally express to the Appropriations Committee its sincere appreciation and strong support for Governor Malloy's proposed level funding of the Education Cost Sharing (ECS) grant for the coming biennium. At this most difficult time, when virtually all other budget items are on the table and governors in other states are cutting education, our Governor has proposed to fill the \$270 million gap in education funding that was left by the expiring ARRA funds. However, level funding of the ECS is still a cut. In most school districts, the past three years of level funding has led to an erosion of core academic programs and a narrowing of the curriculum, jeopardized the capacity of schools to deliver quality education services, and caused significant demoralization among staff, students, and their parents. Two more years of level ECS funding will bring an even more painful savaging of school budgets that are in many communities already tenuous.

CCJEF similarly salutes Governor Malloy for forthrightly acknowledging that the ECS formula is broken and outdated. We applaud the bold steps he has proposed elsewhere (in HB 6385) outlining a process for finally fixing the equalization aid grant and related funding streams, and we look forward to working with him toward that goal.

However courageous the leadership of our new Governor in affirming the state's commitment toward sustaining and improving Connecticut's public school system, CCJEF believes that the Appropriations Committee's review of the Department of Education budget should consider the following:

- The impact of declining state support disproportionately impacts Priority School Districts and other struggling districts that serve significant numbers of students from low-income families, English language learners, and children needing Special Education services. In addition to depending heavily upon ECS funding, the operating budgets of these high-need school districts rely upon the **Special Education Excess Cost, Pupil Transportation, Bilingual Education, and Priority School District grants** for essential assistance in meeting the great needs of the schoolchildren they serve.
- Notwithstanding the depth and breadth of students' learning challenges within Priority School Districts and other low-wealth/high-need districts, state aid has failed to keep pace with the increasing academic and fiscal distress of these districts. In part, that is why CCJEF found it necessary in 2005 to file *CCJEF v. Rell*. The March 2008 Connecticut Supreme

Court decision we won (pre-trial) in that case makes clear that the state's constitutional duty to public schoolchildren is to ensure quality education for all.

- With the above in mind, we beseech this Committee to:
  - Remove, or at least substantially lessen, the caps that have been extended on state expenditures for **SPED Excess Cost** and **Pupil Transportation**. Lifting or lightening the two caps will benefit all Connecticut school districts.
  - At a minimum: fund **Pupil Transportation** (line T550) at the FY12 recommended level (\$94,144,509); **Bilingual Education** (T554) at the requested FY12/recommended FY13 level (\$2,024,918); **Priority School Districts** (T555) at the FY13 requested level (\$120,432,947); and **SPED Excess Cost** (T559) at the recommended FY12/requested FY13 level (\$183,372,505). (The requested and recommended levels referred to are from the Governor's proposed biennium budget as presented on January 16, 2011.)
  - Find extra "turnaround funds" for the Priority School Districts. CCJEF finds it incomprehensible and fiscally irresponsible that the neediest schoolchildren and their districts should continually be targeted for budget reductions, over the past and present budget years, despite the universal clamor for their performance turnaround. Like the achievement gap, significant and enduring performance gains will require adequate resources. Moreover, HB 6432 (An Act Concerning Closing the Achievement Gap) would mandate school readiness programs and full-day kindergarten in all Priority School Districts — an educationally sound proposal that CCJEF regards as instrumental components of an adequate education — but this once again would come as a totally unfunded mandate. Ironically, some of these districts in which the programs already exist are now facing such deep budget crises that they are reluctantly proposing to eliminate their pre-K programs and offer kindergarten only as a half-day program

Please help ensure that "shared sacrifice" does not have a disproportionate impact on the quality of education being afforded our highest-need, costliest-to-serve students. Their local communities can no longer sustain the high property tax burden that heretofore has been instrumental, albeit futile, in attempting to shield their students and schools from the state's long-term failure to adequately and equitably fund the public schools at a level that ensures equal educational opportunity for all.

Thank you for allowing CCJEF to express deep concern about the impact of the proposed education budget, particularly how it falls short of what is needed in school districts that serve the state's most at-risk schoolchildren.

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*The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding (CCJEF) is a broad-based coalition of municipalities, local boards of education, statewide professional education associations, unions, and other pro-education advocacy organizations, parents and Connecticut schoolchildren aged 18 or older, and other concerned Connecticut taxpayers. Member school communities are home to more than 45 percent of public school students, including some three-fourths of all minority students, those from low-income families, and students from homes where English is not the primary language.*

My name is Stefanie Ramirez, and I am a legally blind woman with Stargardt disease. I am writing in objection to the consolidation of The Board Of Education and Services for the Blind. It is because of this fantastic stand-alone agency that I have been able to accomplish my goals as a student and now as a young working professional. I believe the consolidation of this agency would compromise the high-quality service available to people who are blind, which translates to far less effective results in terms of helping blind individuals reach their full potential.

First of all, since services for the blind are highly specialized, consolidating BESB would result in inadequate training by less-than-qualified professionals. For example, teachers for the blind must be thoroughly trained in such aspects as Braille and Accessible Technology to name a few. Consolidating BESB would result in reducing the agency's workforce, thus eliminating jobs of professionals who are qualified to train in these areas, and then distributing these duties to employees who are not skilled in these teachings. Therefore, the service delivered to the blind individual will be inadequate. And if the service is inadequate, how is a blind person supposed to learn the highly-specialized skills needed to become a productive member of society? In my experience, BESB trained me with a program called Kurzweil, so that I could manage my college textbook reading. Had I not received the superior training on this software from a qualified BESB employee, I would have struggled through my college career. Consolidating BESB would deprive people of getting the proper training they need to progress in life, so BESB should remain a stand-alone agency.

Furthermore, if BESB is consolidated, the timeliness of services being delivered will be affected dramatically. The agency will have the same number of clients to service but will have significantly less resources and man-power to keep up with the demands. After graduating college, I jumped right into the workforce, and I required specialized equipment to do my job effectively. It was BESB that made sure the necessary equipment was delivered to my workplace in a timely manner so I could start my job immediately. There are many clients of this agency who depend on equipment and services every day to maintain their day-to-day lives and if the agency is consolidated, this will negatively impact the speedy service the clients deserve.

In addition, our previous governor Jodi Rell was faced with the difficult decision to eliminate certain state agencies. The fact that The Board Of Education and Services for the Blind was spared in this decision is a testament to the fact that this organization services its clients efficiently and cost effectively. While it may seem like a good idea to consolidate this agency in an effort to save money, in the long run, this approach could backfire and actually increase costs. It is my belief that it will cost more money to maintain the impeccable level of service this agency delivers without the resources and man-power that will be cut as a result of this reduction.

In conclusion, The Board Of Education and Services for the Blind should remain a stand-alone agency because it is an efficiently-run agency that delivers timely services using irreplaceable and highly-trained professionals. To consolidate BESB would mean compromising the productivity and lives of blind people, from school-age children to

adults. And speaking from personal experience, I can tell you I am able to write this compelling argument in my comfortable office environment, calling on my knowledge obtained from my successful completion of a college degree due in large part to the support I received from this agency as a legally blind individual. Consolidating BESB would jeopardize the future of blind individuals, leaving them incompetent and less able to attain the success that I have achieved in my own life.